

A plume of smoke curled invitingly up from the horizon. Willow had been on her way to do something or other- there was a rope in her hand- but now her feet moved towards the smoke.

She could smell it. She inhaled deeply.

Light drew near. Heat caressed her body. Flames danced before and around her and she danced with them and in them. Everything was perfect. Sparks flew in all directions like tiny fairies of destruction. Then the flames went out and she saw that what had been burning had been somebody's camp. Whoops!

With half her mind on the delicious smell of the ashes Willow checked the wreckage for anybody who might've gotten burned. No one was anywhere to be found in or around the crispy structures, so, since the show was over and all, she turned to go.

WX-78 stood a ways behind her, eye sockets and weird little boxy mouth both gaping. It pointed at her.

"Whaddaya want?" she asked, repressing a shudder.

"YOU."

"Me what?"

"YOU HAVE DONE ARSON."

Willow looked back at the ruined structures. Looked like a tent, a chest and a couple of science machines, though the caress of fire had made them all look very much alike. "Naaah, I didn't light them up. I just came by to watch."

"YOU HAVE DONE A CRIME." It grabbed her arm. The robot's cold metal grip was more like a handcuff on her wrist than the touch of another person's hand. She tugged and made just as much headway as if she'd been tugging on handcuffs.

“CRIME MUST BE PUNISHED.” It hauled her towards camp. “I didn’t do any crimes, you hunk a’ tin!”

“I SAW YOU.”

“You didn’t see nothin! Leggo!”

It dragged her all the way into camp, where Wolfgang, Webber, Wilson and Wigfrid were arranged around the fire eating lunch. Immediately Wigfrid jumped up with her spear. “Unhand her, thou metallic monster!”

“YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW WHY I HAVE ARRESTED HER YET,” WX-78 said, but it let go of Willow’s arm. It had been sort of yanking her up off the ground, so she flopped onto her knees. Wigfrid helped her to stand.

“Explain yourself!” Wigfrid demanded with a jab of her spear into the air to show she meant business.

WX-78 pointed to Willow. “SHE HAS COMMITTED ARSON!”

“No I haven’t,” Willow fumed. “Not today, anyway.”

Wigfrid snorted. “Is that all?”

Wolfgang added: “Is anyone burned?”

“AN ICE BOX DIED,” WX-78 snapped.

Willow looked around. Wolfgang was tending to a huge slab of meat cooking over the fire, Webber was sitting on the floor playing with his toys, Wilson was sitting in the corner holding a half-eaten drumstick. Everyone looked a little concerned, but not exactly surprised.

“Fire girl is nice,” said Wolfgang. “Will build new ice box!”

“Hey!” Willow said. “I didn’t DO it!”

“I SAW YOU,” said WX-78.

Webber looked up at her. “If you did do it, it’s okay! We know you can’t always help it, Miss Willow! Um, not that we think you’re lying- we’re just saying!”

She looked at Wolfgang. He shrugged at her. She looked over at Wilson. She couldn’t read his expression. It would make sense for him to think she’d done it.

“Right” Wigfrid gestured to the sky with her spear. “We will settle things with Willow if needed. Go now, metal one!”

“I WANT TO HELP SETTLE THINGS,” WX-78 said.

“Absolutely not!”

“MY BROTHER ICE BOX DIED AND I WANT REVENGE. JUSTICE. JUST-VENGE. THE THING YOU WILL LET ME DO.”

Behind her, Wilson set down his picked-clean drumstick and got to his feet, dusting himself off. “Hey,,” he said. “She says she didn’t do it.”

“BUT SHE DID,,” said WX-78. “I SAW HER.”

“I didn’t,” Willow said.

Wilson said: “You can’t have seen her set the fire because she says she didn’t do it.”

“I SAW HER WATCHING.” WX-78 folded its arms over its chest. “SHE SET THE FIRE SO SHE COULD WATCH IT. SHE IS LYING. YOUR ‘FRIEND’ IS LYING TO YOU.”

“You didn’t even see her set it and Willow isn’t a liar,” said Wilson.

“Is not summer,” Wolfgang interjected. “Fire would not start itself.

“I didn’t,” Willow insisted weakly.

Wolfgang shrugged. “Maybe robot did it.”

“Miss Willow,” Webber asked, “did you see how it did start?”

“I don’t know, it was just there!”

Wilson walked forward and stood next to her with his narrow chest thrown out.

“If she says she didn’t do it, she didn’t do it. Bug off!”

WX-78 looked from his scowling face to Wigfrid’s spear. “YOU ARE HARBORING AN ARSONIST,” it said, and turned on its heel- “HMPH-” and finally left.

Willow looked around. Wilson was already back to rooting around in the ice box.

“Got any more turkey legs?” he asked.

She looked around at the others. “You really believe me that I didn’t do it?”

Wigfrid put her hand on Willow’s shoulder. “If you insist, on your honor, that you did not, then you did not,” she said, and she went back to cleaning her spear.

Wilson found a cookie in the ice box and sat down with it.

Wolfgang shrugged. “Torch lady does fire sometimes!”

“But not this time,” she insisted.

Wolfgang shrugged again. “Okay!”

The tent had burned so well, and made such a pleasing cone of flame. She’d felt great while it was burning-

And then it’d gone out and she’d been looking around at the shell of her camp.

Her and Wilson’s camp. She’d forgotten that little detail. Gee he’d be mad. He’d probably stomp off in a huff and not come back. It wasn’t too cold to get around anymore and his ribs were all better.

She heard footsteps sloshing through the melting snow and turned. He was coming back to camp with an armful of wood.

“Hello!” he said. “I noticed you like big fires, so I-” He slowed to a stop, staring at the camp. “Oh,” he said. “There’s been a big fire here already.”

His shoulders slumped.

“I dunno how this happened,” she said.

He looked right into her eyes and it was as if she could feel him figuring out that she was lying.

He dropped his gaze. “I see. It’s a shame. Help me rebuild?” His tone was polite.

“Of course! It’s my house!”

He set down the logs by the fire pit, which was one of the only things left standing in its original form, and started to shape them into boards. “I hope,” he said, not looking at her as she started to take down the burnt things and pry out any materials still usable, “that it doesn’t happen again. I’m tired. I just-” He rubbed the bridge of his nose and said: “I just hope it doesn’t happen again.”

He knew.

That had been a whole year ago, before Willow had met any of the others. He sat across the fire from her now. He’d found another turkey leg somewhere and was gnawing the last scraps of meat off of it.

“Still hungry, huh?” she asked. “Want me to make you something?”

“That’s all right. I’ll be fine after this.”

“Okay! If you’re sure.” She heard footsteps clacking on the floorboards and raised her head. Miss Wickerbottom was coming up to them.

“Hello, dears,” she said, slightly out of breath. “I heard that there was a question of some arson earlier- I do apologize. I set up a little something to test how quickly a fire spreads here and I was chased away by an errant hound before I could finish the experiment. Someone must have lost it in the woods when it came after them and left

it roaming around loose... I've taken care of that, but abandoning my experiment seems to have caused you some strife. I do apologize!

“Oh!” said Willow. “It’s fine!”

“What were your results?” Wilson asked.

“Fire spreads quickly,” Wickerbottom said.

Wilson nodded.

“Well,” said Wickerbottom, “I shall leave you alone now, dears- again, I’m terribly sorry.” She left.

Willow turned to Wilson. “It was true, see?”

“Of course it was!” He examined the turkey leg- there was nothing left on it that he could possibly eat- and stood up. “I believed you from the beginning.”

“Thanks...”

“Well, you’re not a terribly good liar, my friend.” He yawned. “I’m off to bed.”

“Sweet dreams,” she said quietly.

“Maybe someday,” he muttered, crawling into his tent.

She sat and watched the fire.